

POLITICS AMONG THE ARABS

Illusions of Progress, Delusions of Grandeur

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NO APOLOGY is needed for dealing once again with the subject of Arab nationalism. Whether one thinks of the Middle East in general, or of the special issues raised by Israel's relations with her neighbors, the topic is unavoidable. The difficulty lies in making Arab nationalism palatable to people who like such things flavored with a seasoning of humanist ideology, liberal or socialist. This is not an easy matter, for the Arabs (as their spokesmen have gradually discovered) are not in themselves an attractive people by Western liberal standards. They seem to lack the moral dignity of the Indians, and unlike the Greeks they make no appeal to the Western sense of history. A little unfairly, the average European or American tends to associate them with what he vaguely remembers about the Orient, and the adjective "Oriental" is commonly prefixed to nouns like "duplicity," "cruelty," and "servility." Whether justified or not, such associations undoubtedly tend to establish a certain prejudice in the minds of the best-intentioned Westerners.

It is not uncommon these days to hear pro-Arab Westerners or Arab intellectuals

with a liberal upbringing and outlook complain about Western prejudice against the Arabs. Now and then they are even echoed by Zionists or Israelis who feel that it is not to Israel's long-term advantage to keep herself culturally isolated from her neighbors. On the other hand, there is the difficulty that those enlightened Arab intellectuals one occasionally meets who would seem to speak for a liberal Arab nationalism are notoriously unrepresentative and politically without influence in their countries of origin—which may be the reason why they tend to migrate to places like Oxford. (On closer inspection they frequently turn out to be Christians who do not get on too well with their Moslem fellow Arabs, or secularists who frankly prefer the intellectual fleshpots of the West to the mental fare at home.)

WALTER Z. LAQUEUR's *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East* throws a good deal of light on the forces which have shaped Arab nationalism and rendered its latest manifestations so disconcerting to Westerners brought up on the 19th-century liberal-national synthesis made notable by names like Kossuth or Mazzini. Arab nationalism decidedly is not liberal; neither, one may rejoin, is the modern nationalism of Turkey, for all that Kemal did away with Islam as a state religion. But there is this important difference: the Turks never lost their independence and are consequently free from the peculiar curse of nationalism—the desire to be revenged on one's oppressors, real or imaginary. When they had ceased to be the dominant group in the old Ottoman Empire, they promptly made the transition to independent nationhood. The Arabs by contrast, after putting up for centuries with Turkish overlordship, found

ONCE again: nationalism in the Middle East. The book discussed here by George Lichtheim, *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East* (Praeger, 362 pp., \$6.50), is from the pen of one of COMMENTARY's regular contributors, Walter Z. Laqueur, an article by whom appears elsewhere in this same issue. Mr. Lichtheim, too, hardly needs an introduction in these pages, to which he has contributed numerous articles and reviews. Like Mr. Laqueur, he was born in Germany, brought up in Palestine, and now lives in England. His last previous appearance in COMMENTARY was in June of this year with a review of Louis Fischer's *This Is Our World*.

themselves passing under the control of Western nations like Britain or France, and thus in a manner worse off. For in the Ottoman Empire they had at least been the social equals of their fellow Moslems, the Turks, though the latter tended to monopolize power (rather in the manner of Moscow commissars ordering non-Russian Communists about).

Under Western rule, the Arabs felt helpless and despised. An Arab notable in the old days was at home even in the Constantinople of Abdul Hamid, where people in disfavor with the Sultan had a way of disappearing without trace. The same man's descendant, living under British rule in Cairo or under French control in Casablanca, felt a little like a stranger in his own country. Not surprisingly, Arab nationalism displays an unmistakable note of mortally wounded *amour propre* and a corresponding resentment of the West. The passionate indictment of "Western oppression" has its comic side, for of course the real oppressors of the Arabs for centuries were the Turks, whom few Arabs seem to hate; but then they were fellow Moslems. It is always easier to put up with the ill-treatment if it stays, so to speak, within the family. Being ruled by foreigners whom one secretly envies and who condescend to one's cherished traditions (if indeed they notice them at all) is a more souring experience.

If this were all, it might still be possible to rely on the healing influence of time to make the newly independent Arab or Arabic-speaking countries get over their accumulated sense of grievance. Unfortunately, the factors that made for Turkish misrule in these countries now make for Arab misrule; and misrule breeds tensions which find an outlet in a relentless search for scapegoats. Modern Arab nationalism is not merely xenophobe, but inclined to view the remainder of the world as a source of conspiracies aimed at making the Middle East once more subservient to outside powers.

The chief of these "conspiracies," of

course, is the "imperialist" one, aided and abetted by the "Zionist." Israel itself is regarded as the fruit of an elaborate plot hatched somewhere behind the scenes of the Western world. The Arab mind runs easily to such fantasies, and the Russians—themselves not at all disinclined to attribute occult power to "Wall Street"—are doing nothing to disabuse their new protégés. If Soviet envoys nowadays find such a ready welcome in Middle Eastern capitals, not the least cause must be sought in their ability to exploit a latent strand of nativist distrust of all things Western. It may be that in the long run the Russians will attract some of this perennial suspicion to themselves, simply by being there and affording a target; but for the moment they are having an easy time cashing in on the Arab sense of grievance—a motivation so powerful that an otherwise unpopular dictatorship like that of Colonel Nasser in Egypt can afford to dispense with almost every other form of support.

It is the principal merit of Mr. Laqueur's scholarly study that he not merely brings these facts home to the reader, but fills in the political background common to the ruling Arab nationalist forces and their Communist rivals. Most current writings on the Middle East are innocent of the particular form of sophistication required to get these cross-currents into focus. Their authors either concentrate on socio-economic foundations, which are treated as passive raw material for "development" schemes; or else they tend to get bogged in the complexities of Middle Eastern politics. What is lacking is a sense of the structural character of the changes now going on—changes to which both nationalists and Communists are having to adapt themselves while seeking to control them.

Indeed the very notion that there may be a political structure peculiar to the Arab world seems to run up against some hidden resistance. The Communists, of course, are not inhibited by this intellectual weakness, though they suffer from others. Unlike their

Western opponents, they are not afraid to theorize, being persuaded that theory is essential to practice. They are, moreover, helped by the fact that the Russian Revolution has made its biggest impact on countries more backward than Russia—among them the Middle Eastern lands. This is now beginning to be recognized, but readers of Mr. Laqueur's illuminating study (and particularly of its appendix dealing with the evolution of Marxist-Leninist thought on the subject of Oriental society) will discover with some surprise how far the majority of Western specialists still have to go before they catch up with their Soviet rivals in the field of applied sociology.

There is no point in trying to summarize a mass of information compressed into more than three hundred tightly packed pages of text, much of it dealing with subterranean plottings and complex factional disputes among the minuscule Communist sects of the region. Instead, it may be useful to try to disengage the broad outlines of the argument from the factual material dredged up by the author. Specialists will busy themselves with his detailed accounts of Communist party histories from Egypt to Persia (including Palestine-Israel, where the party was constantly racked by the Arab-Jewish cleavage in its own ranks). The ordinary reader looks for light on the question whether the Communists have a chance of capturing the Arab national movement. The answer appears to be: "Yes, but there is nothing fatal about it." There are rival Arab movements in the field, none of them very attractive by Western democratic standards, but some of them conceivably able to compete with the Communists without themselves falling into a different form of totalitarianism. It is even possible to envisage a situation in which these movements, and the governments they support, will not spend *all* their time and energy contemplating a war of revenge against Israel. But it must be added that these hopes are rather long-term.

Who or what, then, are these movements, and what kind of choice do they offer

to the more or less literate public to which they address themselves? It is important to see this issue in relation to the decline of liberalism. As Mr. Laqueur pertinently observes, "Western liberal nationalism never did have any deep roots in the Moslem countries, though a small upper class was fully Westernized and the constitutions of some countries, such as Egypt, were modelled on the Western European pattern. . . . The nationalist inspiration that these countries received was thus mainly of the post- and anti-liberal era. This nationalism is distinguished by the over-estimation of one's own nation and the denigration of others . . . and a general tendency to attribute anything wrong with one's nation to the evil-doing of others. . . . The teachings of Fascism and National Socialism, as well as the Soviet theory of Russian superiority in all fields, have had more influence than the earlier liberal-democratic brand of nationalism."

IS THIS too harsh a judgment? A well-meaning outsider might think so, and yet it is substantially echoed by critically minded Arab intellectuals. Thus Walid Al Khalidi, writing in the June 1956 number of the British publication, *The World Today*, comes to more or less the same conclusion, though he phrases it more cautiously. He sees the political scene in the countries of the so-called Fertile Crescent (from Syria to Iraq) as still dominated by an older generation of "traditional Arab nationalists" belonging to a "vague nineteenth century school of liberalism," "secular in outlook and basically pro-Western"; and he then makes it clear that he regards their cause as lost. They are, he points out, yielding increasingly to right-wing and left-wing movements united by a common distaste for liberalism: Communists, Socialists, Moslem Brethren, and—strongest of all at the moment—supporters of what he rather infelicitously describes as "Nasserism," i.e. military dictatorship with a touch of social demagoguery. Before this hydra-headed challenge the older generation of politicians is proving helpless:

"They are representative of the old aristocratic families of the towns, and the feudal and tribal chiefs of the countryside. They are also in alliance with powerful local industrial and commercial interests. They are the Middle Eastern group upon which Western policy is based. Everywhere they are on the defensive and in some countries in thinly camouflaged rout."

This accords with Mr. Laqueur's analysis. In fact there are today few observers who do not (in private at least) echo these utterances. Where Mr. Laqueur differs from Mr. Khalidi (and where this reviewer is inclined to agree with him) is in seeing no great future for "Nasserism." It may be significant that so many Arab modernists have come to place their remaining hopes on the Egyptian dictator, but this is surely evidence of an acute embarrassment over the current state of affairs in the Arab world. Colonel Nasser has already demonstrated conclusively that he is no Kemal. The job of democratizing Egypt's social structure is evidently beyond him; instead, he prefers to rattle his new Russian tanks. Yet he clearly appeals to something latent in the minds of the new urban middle class, and it is only the eventual failure of his experiment that will drive his present well-wishers among the intelligentsia into some sort of Popular Front—or straight into the Communist party.

The latter, needless to say, urges him on—in a spirit worthy of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact—to ever more hazardous military adventures, confident of its own ability to reassemble the pieces after the inevitable crash. And in this strategy it is only seconded by groups such as the Ba'ath, or Renaissance, party in Syria—more or less socialist but, *pace* Mr. Khalidi, far from "Marxist." Both Communists and "Socialists"—"National-Socialists" would perhaps be a better title—clearly expect to profit from the collapse of military dictatorship, and the ensuing civil war.

What is there in all this to justify the pious expectation, now so popular in advanced circles as well as among the more modern-minded representatives of Western

officialdom, that the Middle East will, after an interval of storm and stress, shake down to a reasonably democratic state of affairs? Nothing at all, if one does not allow oneself to be blinded by sentimental prejudice in favor of peoples rightly struggling to be free. Islamic soil is even less favorable to democracy than Latin American, and how much democracy is there in Latin America? It will be a considerable achievement if Israel can be preserved, and Turkey prevented from slipping back into authoritarianism.

Outside these two areas the best one can hope for is that the great powers, including the USSR, may find it to their common interest to refrain from scattering too many arms around. If they could be induced to set up a condominium over the area—tactfully veiled so as to spare Arab nationalist susceptibilities—it would at least be possible to count on a period of peace and quiet. But that is probably too much to hope for. With so much tinder lying around—and what is worse, so much oil—it does not take a great deal of bomb-rattling to set off a conflagration, and nationalist passions run so high in all the Arab lands that even the shoddiest of military regimes can count on popular support for war—initially at least, i.e. until the military chickens come home to roost.

TO RETURN to Mr. Laqueur's analysis. It is sometimes objected by conservative writers that the pessimistic view takes too little account of the constructive work now being done in many parts of the region by government, private firms, and development boards. Iraq, on account of its oil royalties and their investment in canalization and reclamation, etc., etc., is invariably mentioned in this context. In a generation, we are told, it may be the leading country in the Middle East—wealthy, stable, and governed by conservatives—with turbulent Egypt left far behind. This is now the favorite theme of British statesmen and publicists, and for all one knows, it may shortly become the latest American discovery. The fly in the ointment is non-economic and therefore in-

visible. "Of all the Arab countries," observes Mr. Laqueur very justly, "Iraq arouses the strongest feeling of pessimism." This remark has already caused eyebrows to be lifted all around. Sir David Kelly, an elderly oracle of conservatism, protested in the London *Sunday Times*, and pained expressions were visible elsewhere, for Iraq is now the last bulwark of authoritarianism, "moderation," the Baghdad Pact, and Anglo-American strategy generally. And yet, what Mr. Laqueur says is the merest truism.

There may be sound arguments for regarding Iraq's economic future as relatively hopeful, but the idea that the present regime can keep itself indefinitely in the saddle with the help of oil royalties and the police is somewhat naive. A government so patently committed to defense of the landed oligarchy and contempt for the new middle class (to say nothing of "the masses") must sooner or later provoke an explosion. To counter "Nasserism," let alone Communism, it would have to do what by its nature it is incapable of doing: promote the "development" of the country not in cooperation with, but at the expense of, the propertied classes—even if this should be socially wasteful and economically irrelevant. For there is no other way of acquiring a firm popular foundation. But conservative regimes run by elderly statesmen and supported by foreign oil companies are not given to this kind of radicalism. "Hard-headed common sense" is what makes them so appealing to foreign investors and military men—until the day of reckoning. Iraq is a case in point. The crash there, when it finally comes, will be not merely spectacular but bloody. Until then the government of Nuri Pasha es-Said can count on a favorable press, and a discreet trickle of Western arms.

Mr. Laqueur has performed a service in stating these issues in an uncompromising manner, and documenting his analysis with an impressive display of specialist knowledge

on the subject of Communist-nationalist interpenetration. The experts will find it difficult to ignore him. Whether the fashionable publicists and policy-makers will benefit from his work is another matter. In all probability they are by now too deeply committed to their peculiar brand of *Realpolitik* to shift gears in time. In any case it seems likely that the near future will present us all with a series of unpleasant surprises.

AS FOR the present generation of Arab nationalists, it must be confessed that one sees little hope for that political and cultural renaissance which is held out to us as the distant goal of current aspirations. The unpleasant fact about the Arabs—that they are a decayed *ex-Herrenvolk*, who, unlike the Turks, have not come to terms with the real world—is seldom stated in private, and never in public. Westerners have grown chary of judgments liable to upset the possessors of oil fields, and Israelis are rightly reluctant to add to their own difficulties by picking an ideological quarrel with neighbors among whom they must somehow contrive to live. And yet the cauterizing effect of such a truth, once uttered by a responsible statesman (preferably an Arab leader with an unimpeachable record of national constancy), would go far to remove the poison from the mental injury suffered by the Middle East since its first encounter with the modern West—to say nothing of the additional injury done to Arab self-esteem by Israel in 1948.

The worst enemies of the Arabs are those well-meaning Westerners who go on telling them that they are a great people and potentially the core of a renaissance Middle Eastern culture. The truth is that they are neither, but it will take yet further setbacks and disappointments before an Arab leader has the courage to do for them what Kemal did for his people: destroy their illusions and bring them back to reality.